

Bollywood Goes Feminist

Or is India's film industry still not serious about women?

IN THE RECENT CRITICALLY acclaimed Bollywood movie *Queen*, the lead character, Rani, is jilted by her fiancé two days before their wedding. So Rani simply heads out on her honeymoon—by herself. Similarly, the intrepid Vidya, in the 2012 thriller *Kahaani*, single-handedly vows to find her missing husband in chaotic Kolkata.

Queen and *Kahaani* garnered positive reviews for being progressive and female-centric in an industry known for churning out male-centric movies for a predominantly male audience. In most of the 200-plus movies Bollywood produces every year, women play insignificant lady-love roles and are heavily objectified, often through numbers called “item songs” with racy dance moves and sexual innuendo. But is the industry finally on the

culsp of a new trend?

“It’s more like Bollywood—and India—are waking up from an era in which women were imagined as baby dolls and stereotypes,” says Vamsee Juluri, author of *Bollywood Nation: India through its Cinema*. Juluri notes that the earliest Bollywood films did not demean women as much as the later movies of the 1970s: “In a way, what we are seeing now is a return to a better story about women, although in a more contemporary idiom.”

Historically, Bollywood has propagated two female stereotypes: the heroine whom the male lead brings home to Mom, and the vamp he hooks up with but will never marry. Film scholars agree that this distinction has now disappeared, and the heroine has gradually taken on features associated with the vamp. “At

first, there could be a narrative reason for Ganga, a policewoman, to perform “*Cboli Ke Peeche*” (Behind my blouse) to lure the villain,” says Rachel Dwyer, professor of Indian cultures and cinema at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. “However, in recent years, the heroine can drink and smoke and sleep with her boyfriend.”

Still, some experts caution that sexual agency in Bollywood has to be handled more carefully before being recognized as feminist cinema. Referring to the sexually aggressive Leela in the 2013 blockbuster *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, New York University film scholar Richard Allen asks, “What use is sexual choice when the heroine so readily falls for such a conventional male type?”

Juluri lauds filmmakers who take the initiative to make progressive movies. “We seem to find support within the industry for women and their voices more generally,” he says. “Perhaps there are more directors and writers now who are able to combine their idealism with the ability to tell an entertaining tale.”

Yet academic optimism may be premature, according to Mumbai-based screenwriter Megha Ramaswamy. She says the conversation about Bollywood going feminist takes place every year, and nothing really changes: “For every 10 horribly awkward, regressive roles for female actors,” she says, “there seems to be one bright star that puts an important lesson out there.”

That sounds as if Bollywood still has a way to go.

—DINSA SACHAN

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